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Designers and Social Responsibility

Good places exist within and respond to many contexts. The following essays suggest new ways in which designers can construct a sense of responsibility to the communities, people and environments that are the context of their work. The essays are excerpted from presentations given last March at a symposium called "Social Responsibility and the Design Professions" — a day-long discourse about the social, economic, ecological and institutional implications of environmental design.

The symposium, sponsored by Architects, Designers and Planners for Social Responsibility/New York, was held at the New School for Social Research and organized by Susana Torre, chair of the environmental design department at Parsons School of Design.

Responsibility and Responsiveness

Richard Sennett

When I was asked to address the question of the social responsibility of architects, I thought it would be interesting to pursue the question of the social responsibility of architectural forms. It also occurred to me that one could ask in what way architectural forms can be socially responsive, which is different from being socially responsible. I want to explore those two notions by describing the work of the Indian architect Balkrishna Doshi, which seems to me to be both socially responsive and responsible.

Doshi has been working for many years on the rebuilding of Jaipur. The work is an attempt to incorporate a notion that is genetic to Jaipuri architecture — that the form of every house represents the cosmology of the universe as it was conceived in the ninth century, that every house is an extension of that rigidly geometric world. Doshi has tried to build housing that is massive in scale, up to a thousand units at a time, and that can be put up in accordance with these old cosmological principles.

To be socially responsible is to believe, whether people like it or not, in a social vision that brings people together. It means talking not about issues of representation and popularity, but about what a social space ought to look like.

— Richard Neutra

Finding Spaces and Filling Them

Jane Lippman

New York

Effective, socially responsible action takes more than good will and motivation. It takes open spaces in the urban fabric, an open process to fill in those spaces and good timing.

By “open space” I mean something more than public space. There is physical space, which is what architects and planners usually work with, and there is social space, which is what sociologists like me usually work with.

One can think of open space as emptiness or as opportunities. One can look at burned-out areas of our cities as abandoned or as potentiallyfillable. One can look at empty nests as merely or free.

I have been working on a project that focuses on New York City’s East Village, a neighborhood to the east of Greenwood Village, where the destruction of the physical area and its social fabric has resulted in a large amount of open physical and social space. About, abandon—